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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007402

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2013

TAGS: KPAL IS PTER LE JO

SUBJECT: PRISONER ISSUE PROVIDES MORE FODDER TO ANTI-NORMALIZERS IN JORDAN

REF: A. AMMAN 07111

¶B. AMMAN 07268

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Jordan's continuing inability to secure the release of Jordanians in Israeli custody is a source of growing frustration for Jordanian officials and is providing political fodder to the GOJ's critics. The Israeli DCM told DCM that while returning four Jordanians "with blood on their hands" would be near impossible because of legal restrictions, a deal involving some of the remaining probably could be worked out. He questioned why King Abdallah had not raised the matter with Israel. The Islamic opposition has publicly criticized the government on this issue. Public GOJ statements suggesting an imminent release appear to have backfired -- raising and then dashing public expectations. Anti-normalizers, led by Islamic Action Front MPs, will likely seize on the prisoners' fate as yet another example of why Jordan's peace treaty with Israel is of no benefit to Jordanians when Parliament resumes in December. End Summary.

GOJ OPENS ITSELF UP TO CRITICISM

¶2. (C) The impasse between Jordan and Israel over the fate of more than 80 Jordanian prisoners in Israel continues to frustrate Jordan's leaders, whose conflicting public statements over the past two weeks have opened them up to criticism from the political opposition. Minister of State and Government spokesperson Asma Khader said on November 4 that Israel might release 25 Jordanian prisoners "soon," adding that the GOJ is "standing firm" in demanding the release of the four Jordanians detained before 1994. In an apparent attempt to lower expectations after Khader's upbeat statement, Muasher addressed the issue the next day during an interview on Jordan TV. He said that Jordan continues to work towards securing the release of all citizens detained in Israel, stressing that Hizballah's progress with negotiations with the GOI -- which Hizballah has publicly claimed includes the fate of Jordanian prisoners -- does not constitute an embarrassment to the GOJ. Muasher's office director Ali al-Ayed acknowledged to PolCouns the conflicting messages, saying that Khader, despite a long conversation with ForMin Muasher on the topic, "did not understand" what Muasher told her.

¶3. (U) A week later, after a press report quoted Israeli Ambassador Handlesman as saying Israel is considering a request from King Abdallah for a "gesture," Khader on November 11 confirmed that negotiations are "still ongoing." In the interview, Handlesman said Israel's conditional acceptance of a prisoner swap with Hizballah would not include any Jordanians, saying there was no "linkage" between the two. In contrast to Muasher's earlier public criticism of Hizballah's advocacy for Jordanian prisoners (ref A), Khader said: "We welcome any release of Jordanian prisoners, be it through our negotiations or through the swap deal with Hizballah," but repeated Muasher's claim that the GOJ has not been in contact with the group on the matter.

ISRAELI DIPLOMAT ASSESSES PRISONER STALEMATE

¶4. (C) During a meeting with the DCM and PolCouns on November 10, Israeli DCM Dany Nevo said that the four most controversial cases -- Jordanians charged with murdering an Israeli -- absolutely would not be released because of the threat of lawsuits from the victim's family. He suggested that a deal involving most of the Jordanian prisoners probably could be worked out. Among those he thought could be resolved, 25 are "common criminals" and another 31 are accused of immigration violations.

¶5. (C) Without going into specifics, he said some of the Jordanian prisoners in Israeli custody may not want to return to Jordan. Moreover, he noted that Jordanian officials

probably would not want to accept many of them as well (presumably the criminals). He expressed dismay with ForMin Muasher's focus on the four Jordanians "with blood on their hands."

MORE AMMUNITION FOR THE ANTI-NORMALIZERS

16. (U) A leading Islamic opposition newspaper, al-Sabil, focused on the issue, reporting this week that Israel had refused to release all of the prisoners. In a jab at the government, the paper highlighted the GOJ's failure to secure the prisoners' release from Israel while Hizballah was reported to be on the verge of a deal with its sworn enemy. Al-Sabil quoted Islamic Action Front MP and leading anti-normalizer Ali Abu al-Sukkar (ref B): "Hizballah assured us that it would not abandon any Jordanian prisoners whom Israel refuses to release."

COMMENT

17. (C) The GOJ's public statements suggesting an imminent release complicated an already touchy situation, raising -- and then dashing -- public expectations for a quick resolution. It also has provided political fodder to the opposition. We suspect -- and the MFA fears -- that IAF MPs will seize on the issue when Parliament reconvenes in December as yet another example of why Jordan's peace treaty with Israel is bad for Jordanians.

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